Curriculum & Instruction Research

Native Language For School Success*

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Abstract

This paper provides insights regarding family provisions for home (native) language use as it relates to the schools perception of young children's school achievement. Teachers of young mainland Puerto Rican children nominated higher and lower achieving learners in grades K-2. Standardized achievement tests confirmed teacher nominations. Thirty families were interviewed at home where it was found that parents of higher achieving children prefer a native language environment to a greater extent than families of lower achieving children. These findings lend support for native language instruction (at home and at school) as an avenue for strengthening the academic school achievement of young mainland Puerto Rican children. A discussion of these findings is provided as are suggestions for future research.

Introduction

The study of ethnically and linguistically diverse families is complex, involving issues of language, culture, socio-economic status, intergenerational evolution, socio-political issues, historical contexts, and educational equity. Increasing our knowledge about these issues, however, can help to portray the daily lived realities faced by families and begin to dispel myths and misconceptions held by society. This paper relays an investigation viewing the use of home (native) language by Puerto Rican mainland families, as it relates to the school's perception of young children's school achievement.

Historically Latino families (e.g., Puerto Rican and Mexican-American) in the U.S. have been relegated to a minority status

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whose contribution to the educational enhancement of children and schools is less than valued. Dunn (1987), for example, contends that the underachievement of Latino children is attributed to the family's inferiority with regard to cultural ideals, values, family organization and lack of concern for education. A recent quote from a Kappan article helps to further illustrate this point, "For many Hispanics there is no family tradition of expectations of academic success" (Abi-Nader, 1991,p. 547). Ironically, a bulletin board in a largely Latino Pennsylvania school building reads: **"Parents Keep Out. Wait for the school bell!"**

The need to contribute to the school success experienced by Latino children can be seen in light of recent demographic trends affecting young bilingual children (Hodgkinson, 1985; 1991). In addition, recent reports, Aspira's Five Cities High School Dropout Study (Fernández, Henn-Reinko & Petrovich, 1989); Children's Defense Fund (Miranda, 1991); The National Council of La Raza (1986); Hispanic Policy Development Project (1986, 1987, 1989); U.S. Bureau of the Census (1991); and Valdivieso and Davis (1989), continue to document concern about how Latino children are faring in schools and later as adults attempting to contribute to their own success and that of our nation. The overriding issue stems from the inability of Latino children to experience success in schools, despite high parental educational expectations and the traditional "caring curriculum" that is such an integral part of Latino families (Soto, 1991a; 1992a).

Some of the problem stems from the fact that parenting and teaching roles are viewed as separate domains with classroom doors acting as barriers, placing limits among the intersections of the school's educational culture and the home learning environment. Home and school interactions are embedded in a complex society and "blaming" families, "blaming" teachers, or "blaming" children is not likely to illuminate or enhance the relationship among the players. Our goal as researchers, educators, and parents should be to gain insights about ways of enhancing the current and future educational possibilities for children.

Recent research viewing interactions among ethnically/linguistically diverse families and schools (Ada, 1988; Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Cazden, Carrasco, Maldonado-Guzman & Erickson, 1985; Cochran & Dean, 1991; Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Harry, 1992; Au & Jordan, 1981; Phillips, 1983; Siegel & Laosa, 1983; Soto, 1989, 1992a; Ogbu, 1982; Trueba, 1989; Wong

Fillmore, 1990) has focused on the study of cultural continuity and discontinuity, family strengths, as well as the ecology of the family. Researchers interested in the home learning environment (Bloom, 1964; Kalinowski & Sloane, 1981; Laosa, 1984; Marjoribanks, 1979; 1987; Soto, 1989) have indicated a distinction among process and structural-functional variables as these relate to school achievement. The process variables refer to the behaviors families engage in search of enhancing children's academic success; while the structural-functional variables refer to areas which may be beyond a family's ability to control (e.g., socio-economic status). Laosa (1978), for example, found that parents' educational attainment is an important variable to consider; while Soto (1989) found that one process variable entitled "Family Involvement" (educational and recreational activities that parents and children engage in together) contributed significantly to children's (school) academic achievement.

Keeping in mind that families are not alone in contributing to the educational success of learners, researchers viewing the home learning environment have explored the relationship among the home learning environment and school achievement (Bloom, 1964; Dave, 1963; Marjoribanks, 1979; 1987); the relationship among the home learning environment of Latino families and children's school achievement (Laosa, 1978; Soto, 1989, 1992a); while this investigation focuses on home (native) language use and the school's perception of young children's school achievement.

The current investigation builds upon six years of home interviews with Puerto Rican mainland families. The research paradigm has been formative, evolving from quantifiable interviews (with the assistance of the Puerto Rican Spanish translated version of the Family Environment Scale, (Soto, 1986) to ethnographic interviews (Soto, 1992a). The quantifiable data has led to the following conclusions: a) the families of both higher and lower achieving children have high educational expectations for their children (Soto, 1986); b) current theoretical formulations of motivation may be culturally incompatible for Puerto Rican children (Soto, 1988); c) critical factors affecting the differential school achievement of Puerto Rican children are embedded in dimensions of process variables, structural variables, and bilingualism (Soto, 1990a); and, d) suggests that this line of research pursue issues of bilingualism and broader ecological perspectives (Soto, under review).

This portion of the research provides insights about the home (native) language use and the school language preferences of families perceived as having higher and lower achieving young children by the school.

Research Strategy

Home interviews were conducted with thirty families of young children in an urban eastern Pennsylvania community. Teachers of young mainland Puerto Rican learners (grades K-2) were asked to nominate the highest and lowest achievers in their classrooms keeping in mind that children's competence includes social, academic, and language domains. The school district facilitated the quantitative achievement test scores: Metropolitan Readiness Test (MRT), Metropolitan Achievement Test (MAT), and the Spanish Assessment of Basic Education (SABE).

The respective families were interviewed at home (without prior knowledge of achievement scores or teacher nominations), in the parents preferred language, with the assistance of items from the Family Environment Scale (Marjoribanks, 1979). The Puerto Rican Spanish translated version of the Family Environment Scale has a total alpha reliability coefficient of 0.92 (Soto, 1986). The home interview questions consisted of demographic information, home language use, family educational activities, and parental preference for language and cultural school programs.

The Puerto Rican families residing in "Steel Town," comprise 25% of the total population. The thirty children whose families participated in this study attend a public elementary school that is approximately 80% Puerto Rican, with 50% of the teachers and the school building principal being of Puerto Rican origin. Puerto Rico was the place of birth for all the fathers while twenty-three mothers were born on the island. All of the teachers participating in this study reflect the same ethnic and linguistic background as the children.

Findings

There were 15 higher achieving and 15 lower achieving children's families interviewed for the purposes of this study. The teacher's perceptions of higher and lower achieving children were confirmed by standardized achievement test scores in all but one instance (n = 16 top half; n = 14 lower half).

Children's ages ranged from approximately 5 to 7.5 years of age with 15 of the children born in Puerto Rico (11 Hi + 6 Lo) while 15 were born on the mainland (4 Hi + 9 Lo 15). The sample was comprised of 18 girls and 12 boys (Hi 6 boys, 9 girls; Lo 9 boys, 6 girls). The families have resided in the mainland within a range of several months to 40 years. The families of the higher achieving children comprise more recent arrivals to the mainland, having resided an average of 6.8 years. The lower achieving children have lived on the mainland almost twice as long, with an average of 12.3 years.

Table 1 presents the Home Language preference from the parents' point of view, based upon achievement and the number of years the families have resided on the mainland. The parents of the higher achieving young learners prefer a native language environment to a greater extent than the parents of lower achieving young learners.

Table 1
Home Language

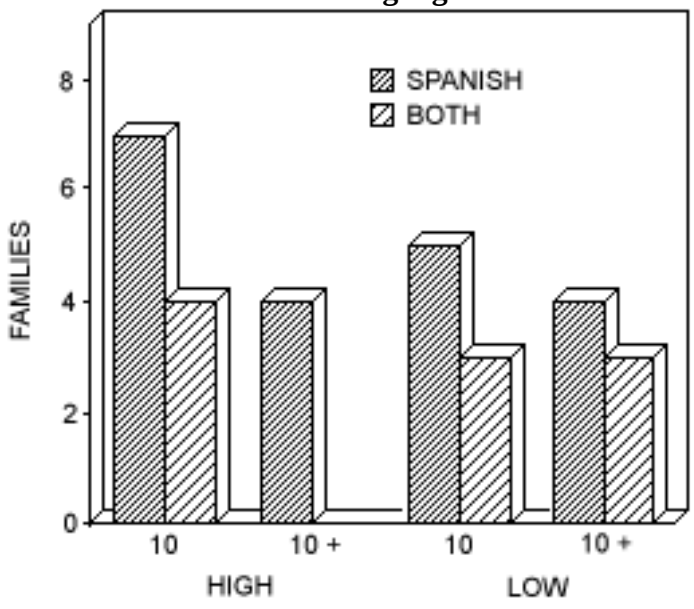


Table 2 presents a set of four tables depicting the parents preference for school based language instruction based upon recency of arrival and age of the child. These tables indicate differing preferences among higher and lower achieving children's parents and similar preference patterns for younger and older learners. The parents of the higher achieving children indicate a preference for a school learning environment that emphasizes native language instruction initially to a gradual emergence of bilingualism and English language instruction. Parents of the lower achieving children indicate a preference for initial instruction in both languages and less defined but "mostly English" school learning environment.

Table 2

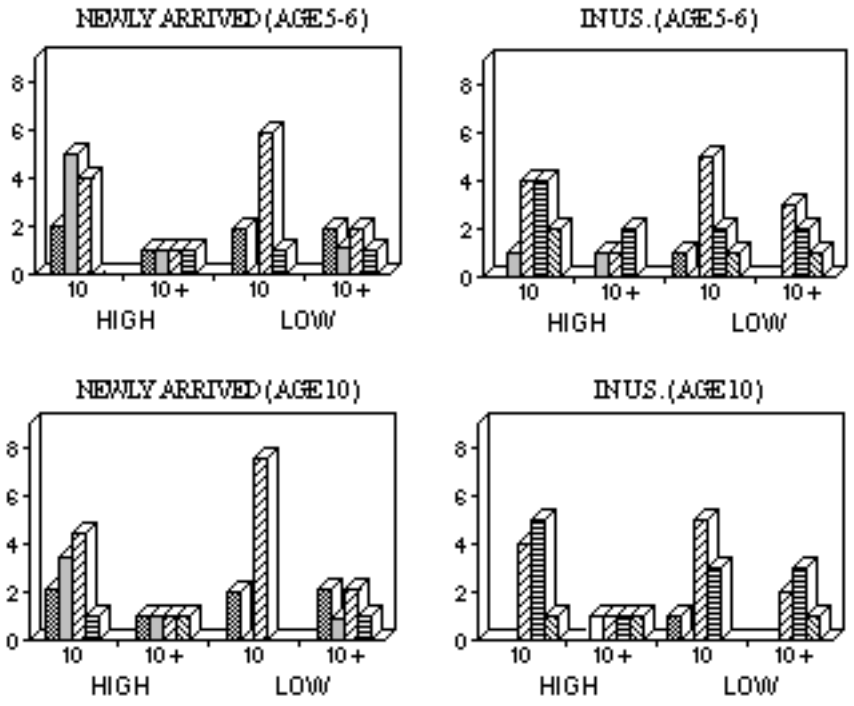
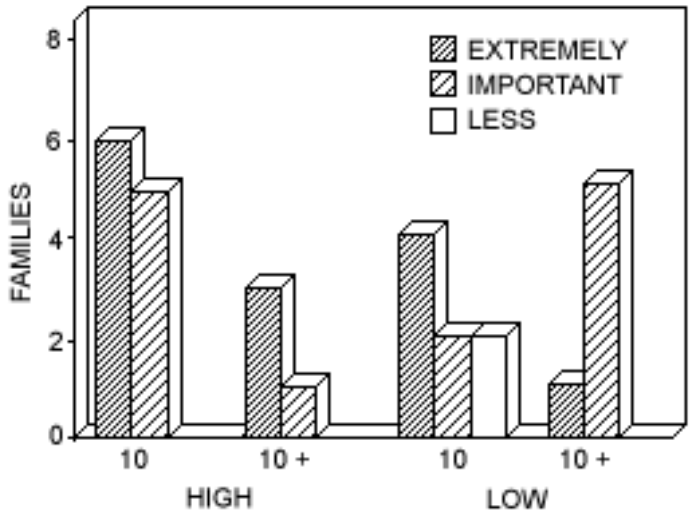


Table 3 confirms the importance of native language for the thirty families. The parents were asked to indicate the importance of maintaining the native language (Spanish) in the family and the importance of children speaking the native language fluently. Table 3 indicates that, to a greater extent, in the homes of the higher achievers the parents felt it was “extremely important” to maintain the native language; while in the homes of the lower achievers it was “important.”

Table 3
Importance of Native Language



The importance of retaining native language capabilities is illustrated by two sample qualitative remarks:

a) "I never realized how important Spanish was to our family until grandmother died. I know that I lost the ability to understand and retell the stories she loved to tell us... and feel that I missed out on a great deal."

b) "The truth of the matter is that my English is fine and that Jose speaks more English than Spanish. There is a feeling of... guilt (I guess you would call it) when our children do not recognize the writers and the poets, the artists and the classical music of our people."

Discussion

This paper has examined the home (native) language use and school native language preferences of a group of thirty mainland Puerto Rican families of young (K-2) children. The descriptive information obtained regarding home language use and school language preference indicates differences among higher and lower achieving young children's parents. In the homes of the higher achieving young children it is evident that maintenance of native language is extremely important and that a gradual exposure and transition to English is envisioned by the parents.

The parents who indicated a preference for emphasizing native language instruction at home were also the parents of the children regarded as higher achieving by the school. The fact that these higher achieving young children received the necessary support for maintaining their native language lends support to Cummins' (1989) theory of threshold levels of language proficiency. Cummins (1981; 1984) maintains that children whose academic proficiency (literacy skills) in native language were well established, developed second language academic proficiency more rapidly than younger (immigrant) students.

The importance of transferability of native language skills with regard to school success is supported by Cummins' dual iceberg metaphor. In the "common underlying proficiency" (CUP) theory described by Cummins, skills acquired in one language can transfer easily to another language. Once a child has learned to read, or has acquired cognitive skills in one language, transference to the second language can occur easily and efficiently. This means that contrary

to popular belief, more exposure to the native home language (Spanish) will produce greater proficiency in the second language (English). From this investigation it can be concluded that the home language learning environment provided by families of higher achieving young children provide higher levels of native language proficiency, thereby facilitating transferability of skills and the opportunity to experience school ‘‘success.”

The higher achieving children in this investigation were aged 5-7.5 years old and grew up in a home learning environment supportive of the family’s native (Spanish) language. The families of the higher achieving children made provisions for maintaining the native language at home and were supportive of initial native language instruction in school. The families provided a developmental progression of first and second language learning with initial native language instruction followed by the gradual emergence of bilingualism and English language instruction. This study helps to build a case for native language instruction (at home and at school) as an avenue for strengthening the academic school achievement of young mainland Puerto Rican children.

The expectation for initial dual language proficiency by parents of young lower achieving children (without the provision for a developmental progression which includes native language learning and maintenance of the native language) may be placing unrealistic demands on young learners. The parents of the lower achieving young children reflect socialization practices portraying ambivalence (or perhaps internalized oppression) in second language learning. The parents of higher achievers, on the other hand, may be providing optimal levels of native language learning that can enhance the young learner’s academic capacity.

Parents, teachers, and researchers need to view current provisions of language learning environments at home and at school. The Latino young children in this investigation, who were perceived as “successful” higher achievers by the schools, had been afforded optimal levels of native language learning and were provided with a developmentally appropriate model for second language learning by parents. The continued concern for how Latino young children are faring in schools, the documented loss of native languages (Veltman, 1988; Wong Fillmore, 1992), and the continued proliferation of English-only immersion programs (Soto, 1992; Soto & Smrekar, 1992) makes it imperative that educators and

parents examine existing provisions for the early childhood education of young Latino children.

Future research should continue to explore the interface among the educational role families and schools play in the lives of young bilingual/bicultural children. In light of policy discussions by educators regarding the early education of bilingual/bicultural learners (Soto, 1991; Soto & Smrekar, 1992; Soto, Lopez, et al., work in progress, Wong Fillmore, 1992), this line of research will benefit from qualitative descriptions affording a voice to the particular players as they negotiate among the home and school culture, as well as descriptions of children's perceptions and contributions to the learning process. As of yet there are unspecified dimensions of language and cultural competence contributed by individuals (i. e., families, educators, learners) and systems to the educational learning environment. The educational issues affecting young learners on a daily basis needs to be pursued in light of congruence (Trueba, 1987) or lack of congruence among home and school cultures embedded within societal and historical contexts.

Families continue to serve important educational and socialization roles for young learners. As the traditional roles families and schools have played in the past emerge and evolve based upon societal change, it may be that educators of young children will begin to serve an increasingly extended family-like role. These proximal relations affecting children's lives on a daily basis need to be viewed within the evolving and emerging societal context, as the latter enhance culturally and linguistically diverse children's educational possibilities. The grand questions may be: How can educators and policy makers facilitate and legitimize ownership of the native language base sought by culturally and linguistically diverse families?

Summary

This research provides insights about the home (native) language use and the school language preferences of families perceived as having higher and lower achieving young children by the school. The Puerto Rican young children in this investigation, who were perceived as "successful" higher achievers by the schools, had been afforded optimal levels of native language learning and were provided with a developmentally appropriate model for second language learning by parents. These findings help to build a case for native language instruction (at home and at school) as an avenue

for strengthening the academic school achievement of young mainland Puerto Rican children.

Future research should continue to explore the relationships regarding the educational role families and schools play in the lives of young bilingual/bicultural children. Home and school interactions are embedded in a complex society so that our goal as researchers, educators, and parents should be to gain insights about ways of enhancing the current and future educational possibilities of young linguistically and culturally diverse children.

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